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The Present Condition of the Florida Seminoles

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James Spuhler

THE PRESENT CONDITION OF THE FLORIDA SEMINOLES

Of all the tribes in the United States at the present time
the Seminoles in the Florida 'glades have probably retained the
greatest amount of aboriginal culture, Since the opening of
southern Florida by roads in the last ten years, they have been
undergoing a fast disintegration in many of the more subtle things
that bind the tribe together. The councils of the "medicine men"
at the Green Corn Busk have less control over the young men and
these are taking on "white culture" in all its forms from whiskey
to "Indian villages" for tourist attraction. There, however is yet
a chance to get an idea of the everyday life of the Seminoles.

When a young man marries he goes to live with his wife's
parents and relatives. These may form a group of from 2 to 5

families living in their respective "cheekes" or thatched huts. These houses have no sides, but have peaked roofs or eaves that come down to about four feet above the ground. The floor is usually an elevated platform about three feet above the ground. Besides a number of these "cheekes" there is usually one with no platform and a higher roof that is used for cooking. The only other large appurtenances around the camp are a number of tables or racks from waist to breast height on which food and cooking utensils are kept. As a rule these villages are located on small hammocks or islands in the 'glades or Big Cypress Swamps. These villages are occupied only part of the year. The Seminoles move around hunting and visiting the rest of the year and live under canvas flies supported on poles..

On some other nearby hammocks they make their farms by burning the brush and girdling the oaks and other large trees. They use no plow, but just plant their corn in irregular rows, not as close together as do the white farmers. Among the corn plants, they plant melons and squashes. These form about all of the cultivated food except for a few banana trees and some sugar cane around their camp. Wild plants are not utilized to any great extent except when the villages are near pine ridges and the Indians can get the zania root to form their "coomptie" flour. At times they eat the heart of the cabbage palm.

Wild animals are not as common as they once were but they still form a good part of the diet. Deer are the most commonly hunted, and with a few hogs they raise, form most of their meat supply. Birds are taken quite often and when ever available, terrapins are relished. Fish are "gigged" along the canals with the regular five-tined gig that they can get in the cities.

This food all goes into one big pot and is kept on the fire all the time. Its main constituent is cornmeal plus anything else that is around and the sum total is called "sofkee". This is eaten from a large communal spoon which is passed from person to person.

As might be expected, they wear the simplest of clothes. The women wear a full length skirt that sweeps the ground and above the waist they wear a blouse that almost meets the top of the skirt. A cape is sewed on over the blouse which comes almost to the elbow. The dress is a riot of color made of many small colorful pieces of material put together in an applique technique. The men nowadays wear store trousers with a native shirt made like the women's dresses. The older men wear a tunic that comes to the knees and a turban of bandanas. A neckerchief completes the costume.

At the present time there is very little handicraft. The Seminoles do a little silver work, but they did more of this in the old days. Missionaries are introducing beadwork and basketry and the Indians make some souvenir dolls to sell to the tourists. They are excellent woodcarvers and make finely carved spoons. Their canoes are one of the most noticeable things made. Their craft are from twelve to twenty feet long and are hollowed out of a single cypress tree. These are tricky and require practice to stand in them, much less to pole them along.

When an Indian is believed to be on the death-bed, his relatives try to remove him from the village. If he dies in the village, the people believe it contaminated and desert it.

Burials are usually made on an isolated island and the body is enclosed in a log-cabin-like frame work of logs covered over with slabs.

The Seminole are remarkably free in their relations with the white man's law. They are allowed to hunt game at any time of the year but do incur the game warden's wrath when they sell it or trade their game for whiskey. They are allowed to settle their own homicides and are never brought to trial for them. The usual punishment for murder is banishment for a prescribed length of time.

J.M.Goggin

MAN the MASTER and the LOWLY BEASTS

OF

A group of anthropological rhymes

Evolution

I cannot help but muse aloud
And, doing so, be awfully proud
That Man, in rising from the Brink
Has left behind his beastial stink.

In eyes and ears and digits too,
The ape, the monk, and I, and you,
We're all alike;----now wait, let's think:
Ah yes, it's Man that's lost the stink.

But there are times in Picture shows
And locker rooms, when Heaven knows
One's much too tired to stop and think
Which one has lost, which kept the stink!

Mythology

Sweet Hebe in reverse,
Old man in White
The gutter's nurse,
The horses' wight
In darkness while we mortals play,
Thy own recepticle
Doth fill
And slowly push away.

No golden chalice rare
But fluted tin;
No song is there
But muted din.
No piper plays his graded reed;
No company of gods
But clods.
And lo, no Ganymede.

The Showoff

The posterior portions of fireflies
Are all that anyone sees,
But a strictly unbiased opinion
Will grant them more than these.